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CURRENTS

TRIAL OF RONALD PELTON

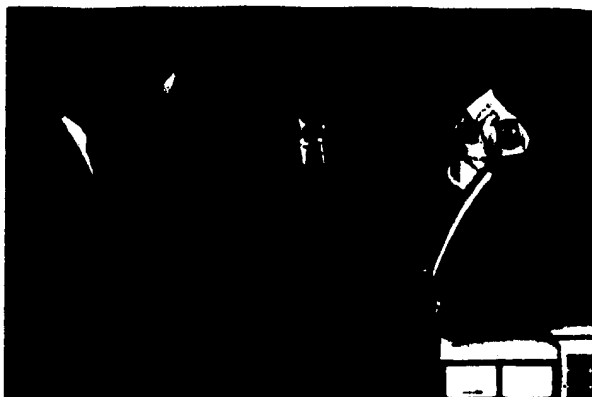
**A pizza-parlor
leak of secrets
to the Kremlin**

■ The espionage trial of a onetime employe of the ultrasecret National Security Agency highlighted a slippery problem: Trying and convicting accused spies without giving away even more sensitive information.

Federal prosecutors on May 29 briefly halted testimony in the case of Ronald Pelton, 44, a 14-year veteran of the NSA charged with selling U.S. intelligence-monitoring secrets to the Soviet Union for \$35,000. Prosecutors feared that a witness was about to spill the specifics of an operation referred to in court only as "project A."

News reports already had disclosed that Pelton is accused of turning over to Moscow the details of "Ivy Bells"—a top-secret project involving intelligence gathering by U.S. submarines in Soviet waters.

As in many spy trials, officials carefully measured the classified data that would emerge. "It should be understood," senior intelligence officials said



Pelton, center, on his way to Baltimore spy trial

on May 28, "that the decision to make use of this information in trial has been made . . . after careful consideration of the demands of trial and the potential harm that release of this selected data may cause the national security."

Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey and NSA's director, Lt. Gen. William Odom, took the unusual step of cautioning reporters "against speculation and reporting details beyond the information actually released at trial." It was the CIA chief's third public warning to the news media recently. President Reagan hailed the nation's spies on May 29, telling an audience that U.S. intelligence services throughout

history "often provided the key to victory in war and the preservation of our freedom during an uneasy peace."

For all the controversy, Pelton's trial raised the curtain only slightly on a shadowy world of espionage in which reality often seems to ape spy-thriller fiction. According to testimony, the financially strapped Pelton simply called the Soviet Embassy in Washington and offered to sell some of the nation's most valuable secrets.

Pelton was said to have taken monthly phone calls from his KGB handlers at a pizza parlor in suburban Washington. When his car ran out of gas en route to one such rendezvous, Pelton complained to his girl friend: "That was our money, and now we are not going to have any." He could face life imprisonment.

Pelton's alleged treachery might have gone undetected but for revelations of a Soviet spy who defected, told what he knew of KGB penetrations in the U.S., then redefected to Moscow last year. ■

by Stewart Powell